Chapter 3

Hopeful Hybridities: Transformative Interspecies Relationships in Dystopian and Post-Apocalyptic Visual Narratives

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Abstract

This chapter asks how the visual grammar of comics might subvert the established tropes of dystopian fiction. Is it possible to suggest new ways of being and seeing from within? In addressing these questions, Kahn uses three epic graphic narratives that engage with this question through exploring alternative communities, especially human/animal collaboration or species hybridity. All three texts utilise postmodern narrative strategies to explore dystopias as products of late modernity, attempts to close down critical thinking rather than question established ideologies. Via polyphonic perspectives and competing verbal and visual strategies, the examined narratives empower the reader to reconsider norms of power, identity, and the binaries of conventional dystopian narrative closure.

A Critical Lacuna?

In contemporary popular culture, the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres are coming perilously close to normative realism. At such a charged political moment, is it still possible to reclaim the potential of such texts to surprise, to subvert, to challenge? Suvin's classic aspirational statement suggested that the potential of a dystopian text depended on whether its *novum* could "reconcile the principle of hope and the principle of reality" (Suvin, 1987, p. 83).

The animating energy of this thematic grappling has become in critical discourse, a series of ossified categories. These are worth restating as a framework from which I will depart.

In their introduction to *Dark Horizons Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination,* Baccolini and Moylan attempt to revision these categories and identify three strands in dystopian writing, on a continuum from traditional and closed to open. In the traditional dystopia, "a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future" (Moylan, 2013, p. 7). This formal exclusion of the possibility of hope from the narrative focuses us on the nature of closure in such narratives. In contrast, developing a term first utilised by Lyman Tower Sargent, "the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. (Moylan, 2013, p. 7) They argue that new critical dystopias are inherently hybrid, and encode utopian possibility through their endings, though the main body of the narrative may conform to classic dystopian models. Dunja Mohr aligns these formal subversions with subversions of patriarchal gendered norms, and calls them "transgressive utopian dystopias," (2005, p. 4).The third, and rarest strand is 'open' dystopias, which

> resist both hegemonic and oppositional orthodoxies even as they inscribe a space for a new form of political opposition. With an exploration of agency that is based in difference and multiplicity yet cannily reunited in an alliance politics that speaks back in a larger though diverse collective voice, the new dystopias not only critique the present triumphal system but also explore ways to transform it that go beyond compromised left-centrist solutions.

(Moylan 2013, p. 8)

The key trope in this model seems to be its focus on a more complex, pluralist and nuanced understanding of agency. I would argue that such an understanding must move beyond traditional humanist conceptions. This meshes with an exploration of the post-human, since as Pepperell asserts, "post-Humanism is not about the 'End of Man' but about the end of a 'man-centred' universe, or put less phallocentrically, a 'human-centred' universe" (2009, p. 176). Boller emphasises the roots of the critical dystopia in feminist discourse:

Drawing on the feminist criticism of universalist assumptions – fixity and singularity, and neutral and objective knowledge – and recognising the importance of difference, multiplicity, and complexity, of partial and situated knowledges, as well as hybridity and fluidity, the critical dystopias resist genre purity in favour of an impure or hybrid text that renovates dystopian sf by making it formally and politically oppositional (Voights and Boller, 2015 p. 7).

Such post-humanism is at the heart of Post-Apocalyptic writing. Boller, quoting Curtis, argues that a "discussion of the relationship between dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction opens up another fascinating genre boundary" (Boller 2015, p. 4). Curtis (2010, p. 7) alludes to the fundamental generic hybridity when she emphasised that "[p]ost-apocalyptic fiction exists at a genre crossroads between science fiction, horror and utopia/dystopia.

Yet this hybridity in post-apocalyptic narratives has not been matched by an answering hybridity of critical approaches. For instance, Moylan's discussion is confined to prose texts, which leads him to claim that "Throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text turns on the control of language… Language is a key weapon for the reigning dystopian power structure" (2013, p. 5).

How might the hybrid nature and embodied, visual grammar of comics engage with these established tropes of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction? To focalise this discussion, I am especially interested in inter-species relationships and animal-human hybridity in both dystopian and post-apocalyptic comics narratives, since the "ontological instability of separating human and animal is one of the most tangible topics of posthuman discourse (or 'human-animal studies')" (Jaques, 2015, p.11) These narratives, and their hybrid protagonists, seek to use animality and hybridity to think productively about the nature and meaning of being human, and to expand that understanding in our post-Anthropocene age, in keeping with Vint's aspirational claim that animals, both like us and different in their experience of our shared world, both homely and uncanny, offer a productive way of thinking about other modalities of being, other modes of perception and other ways of being in the world – in reality as much as in fiction. (2012, p. 211)

This *thematic* ontological instability is embodied stylistically in a medium which asks the reader to enact a closure which it perpetually defers; "as closure between panels becomes more intense, reader interpretation becomes far more elastic" (McCloud, 1994, p. 86), oscillating between image and text. This echoes formally Suvin's insistence that the content of dystopian SF be matched in its formal representation, "leaving formal closure cognitively open-ended, regardless of whether at the end of the novel the positive values be victorious or defeated." (Suvin, *Positions*, p. 83). The narrative mode of comics is based on the interaction of word and image and implicitly suggests the limitations of language, deferring closure beyond the text. What can such hybrid characters teach us about living more fully, and stepping away from our anthropocentrism, to discover more nuanced, sustainable and pluralist ways of existing? Such hybridity has not been explored before, either in writings about dystopias, Science Fiction (SF)

or comics, and feels particularly resonant and relevant in our obscene 'Anthropocene' moment. Rather than rely on externally applied categories which seek to quantify dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature without necessarily enlarging our understanding of it, I would like to return to the literary sources of the dystopian imaginary, to unearth tropes that animate classic and contemporary narratives, teasing out their resonance for, and relevance to, both critical discourse and creative poetics.

A Dys-trope-ic Approach

The origins of the dystopian moment in literary SF can be traced back to Swift, and Gulliver's encounter with the rationalist, equine Houyhnhnms. When confronted with the ape-like Yahoos, whom he so closely resembles, Gulliver recoils; "Upon the whole, I never beheld in all my travels so disagreeable an animal, nor one against which I conceived so strong an antipathy" (Swift, 1984, p. 270). What Gulliver seems to be rejecting is his own animality – yet in this inverted space, it is the animals who embody rationalist discourse. Gulliver tries to deny any connection between himself and these animals, despite their similar appearances. Gulliver's breaking point comes when he becomes an object of desire for a female Yahoo whilst bathing in a stream. Shaken, he is forced to admit that "I could no longer deny that I was a real Yahoo in every limb and feature" (p. 315). This knowledge is not healing or cathartic, for it means acknowledging his own hybridity; that he might be both animal and rational being. He cannot bear to see or acknowledge this about himself – he cannot meet his own gaze:

> When I happened to behold the reflection of my own form in a lake or fountain, I turned away my face in horror and detestation of myself, and could better endure the sight of a common Yahoo than of my own person.

(Swift, 1984, p. 327)

His own appearance taunts him with the gap between his "animalistic" outer form and his supposedly "rationalistic" inner being. Despite his ability to communicate, Gulliver is viewed by the horses as a "brute animal" (p. 327). This definition of a being with no interiority becomes a scar, a seam, traversing literary representations of cross-species or cultural encounter, running from Swift to Conrad's "exterminate all the brutes," Kurtz' notorious postscript to his manuscript intended for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 84). Gulliver's "horror" echoes through the canon until it finds new articulation in Kurtz' dying words, "The horror, the horror" (p. 112). This redoubling might suggest the horror of doubleness, of acknowledging our own hybridity, that what we define as "other" – whether animal, or human, might not be so.

The motivation for othering animals in this way can be traced back further to Montaigne's extraordinary essay, *An Apology of Raymond Sebond* (Screech, 1993). Montaigne articulates an inherently dystopian awareness that drives us to distance ourselves from the animal kingdom – that the drive to utopian idealism may in fact come from a rejection of our true nature:

> Man is the most blighted and frail of all creatures, and moreover, the most given to pride. This creature knows and sees he is lodged down here, among the mire and shit of the world, bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey of the building, the farthest from the vault of heaven; his characteristics place him in the third and lowest category of animate creatures, yet, in thought, he sets himself above the circle of the Moon, bringing the very heavens under his feet. The vanity of this

> same thought makes him equal himself to God; attribute to himself God's mode of being; pick himself out and set himself apart from the mass of other creatures; and (although they are his fellows and his brothers) carve out for them such helpings of force or faculties as he thinks fit. How can he, from the power of his own understanding, know the hidden, inward motivations of animate creatures? What comparison between us and them leads him to conclude that they have the attributes of senseless brutes?
> (Screech, p. 505)

There are several parallels to Swift here, from the cloacal obsessions of the Yahoos, to the appellation of brute for creatures we have othered. Montaigne concludes that it is only by acknowledging the agency of the non-human other that we have any chance of building a non-dystopian world: "When I play with my cat, how do I know she is not passing time with me rather than I with her?" (p. 505). This reflection leads Montaigne to argue that our very definitions are based on misprision, on a lack of the kind of embodied seeing he experiences with his cat: "Why should it be a defect in the beasts not in us which stops communication between us?... They may reckon us to be brute beasts for the same reason that we reckon them to be so" (p. 506).

What would animals say, if they could communicate with us? In the act of such communication, what could be conveyed, and what might be lost? These questions are explored with haunting irony by Kafka, in *A Report to an Academy*. The "civilised" ape Red Peter relates his journey towards linguistic mastery as a movement away from the freedom and holistic nature of his "animal" origins:

> free ape as I was, I submitted myself to that yoke. In revenge however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more. I could have returned at first, had human beings allowed it, through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth, but as I spurred myself on in my forced career, the opening narrowed and shrank behind me.
>
> (Glatzer, 1983, p. 250)

This spatial depiction of awareness and identity recalls Montaigne's "vault of heaven," and suggests that it may be precisely because we have cut ourselves off from our fellow creatures and imposed a hierarchy that we have entrapped ourselves in a dystopian reality. It is striking that Peter reflects on his mode of communication as being rooted in the visual, in the sensory: "To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me" (p. 250). This leads Peter to acknowledge the gap between the experience he seeks to convey and his means of expressing it; "Of course what I felt then as an ape I can represent now only in human terms, and therefore I misrepresent it" (p. 253) His awareness of this gap is sharpened by his knowledge of his own hybridity, his own liminality.

In addition to the challenge of conveying embodied experience, the trope of the gaze which featured so strongly in Swift recurs in Peter's description of his relationship with a female ape, and its focus on the relationship between being and seeing: "By day I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it." Peter can sense what he has lost, and what he has become – but all he can do is despair. He despises the human, yet feels alienated from his apelike nature – he is a hybrid, caught between two worlds.

Just as it did for Gulliver, it is Peter's hybridity that torments him, again articulated in a sensory way: "Actually, it's not the smell of human beings that repels me so much, it's the human smell which I have contracted and which mingles with the smell from my native land" (p. 261). Peter has "contracted" humanity like a disease, and the word resonates in English for he is both ill of ease, and the fullness of his identity is constricted, his connection to his prelapsarian self has been contaminated, and now is hard to trace. How do we move from these foundational articulations of dystopian hybridity to modern dystopias? How might we trace the relationships between the entwined tropes of the gaze, embodied knowledge, and the mythic as a mediating space? Given the focus in these foundation texts on embodied seeing, it makes sense to explore these through dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts which are visual in nature, and which foreground hybridity. To do this, I will interrogate the presence of these tropes in three celebrated examples of epic SF comics, in a way that teases out new possibilities for the posthuman and post Anthropocene. Between them, these three titles broke SF comics into the mainstream, both of comics readership and the general public.

Sherryl Vint argues that we need to tread a fine line in our construction and consumption of sf texts that explore the human/animal interface:

> If literature in general, and SF in particular, are to offer us something of the animal's experience and thus enable us to recover an encounter of a mutual exchanges of gazes, we must be attuned to resisting the two fallacies of too inclusive an anthropomorphism and too constant an anthropodenial.
>
> (Vint, 2017, p. 424)

I would suggest that is only through analysing human-animal hybridity that we can avoid falling into the traps that Vint warns against. Despite the classic roots of this form of hybridity which I have traced, exploration of its impact on contemporary visual literature is signally lacking, both in comics scholarship and in writing on dystopias.

Since Donna Haraway's celebrated *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) theorists have explored the feminist implications of cyborg identity, but as Alaimo muses in Writing Nature as a Feminist Space:

> Even though Haraway underscores the fact that the cyborg transgresses the boundaries between human and nature as well as between human and machine, it is telling that the cyborg has become much more popular as a creature of technology, rather than a creature of nature.
> (2000, p. 186)

Alaimo argues that "The most effective way to approach feminism's vexed relationship with nature is to radically rewrite the concept itself. (2000, p. 187). Vaughn & Staples' multi volume, epic SF epic, *Saga* (2012) does just this, in an accessible and celebratory way, and as a result is seen as a hugely influential, "industry-shaping work" (Spencer, 2019). It does so by exploring interspecies hybridity as a challenge to established modes of thinking and identity politics. Staples received an unprecedented nine awards for her work in 2013 alone. In 2018, the continuing narrative was described as "quite possibly the most celebrated comic being released today" ("Vector: Sequentials #1 - Women and SF Comics | comicbookGRRRL," n.d.). Yet this public appeal has not been matched by critical scrutiny.

The space opera centres on Hazel, the child of a forbidden union between two warring races. Her father is Marko, a horned warrior from Wreath, a moon of her winged mother Alana's planet, Landfall. The war between these two races has since engulfed the galaxy in endless conflict, and the existence of a child bearing both wings and horns as Hazel does is an anathema to all involved.

In her more recent writings, Haraway herself issues an urgent clarion call for thinking in less binary ways about nature:

> We have to find another relationship to nature besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia. No longer able to sustain the fictions of being either subjects or objects, all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute nature must find a new ground for making meanings together.
> (Haraway, 2008, p.158)

The eponymous central protagonist of Jeff Lemire's similarly expansive *Sweet Tooth* (2010) goes some way to blurring the boundaries between subject and object in the way that Haraway insists on. The "new ground" she seeks is embodied in Sweet Tooth, also known as Gus, a boy born with deer's antlers. The series imagines a world where humanity is being wiped out by "the sick", a mysterious plague, which may be related to the emergence of a new species of such hybrid animal-human characters. Blamed for the rise of the plague, to which they seem immune, the hybrids are ruthlessly hunted down and either killed or experimented on to find a "cure". *Sweet Tooth* enabled Lemire to win his second Joe Shuster Award for Outstanding Cartoonist. In an interview, Lemire explained that that it was precisely the hybrid form of Gus that served as the seed of the narrative:

> I was always a fan of post-apocalyptic stuff, and I really wanted to try my hand at one of those kinds of stories in my own way. As for the idea of animal-human hybrids and hybrid children… I really wish I did know where that came from! For some reason, I started drawing this kid with antlers – I didn't even know when that started – and a story emerged: A kid with antlers, living in a cabin in the woods with his dad. It evolved from there.
>
> (Jensen, 2019)

The visual preceded the narrative construction. Next came the protagonist's nickname and the title of the series, a sign of prelapsarian hunger for knowledge of the world beyond his cabin, represented by the chocolates that are left for him by hunters. His name thus encodes an involvement with the wider world outside the woods. Stacy Alaimo, reflecting on the need for this kind of interpenetration of self and world, insists that "[t]o counter the dominant figurations of the Anthropocene, which abstract the human from the material real and obscure differentials of responsibility and harm, I propose we think of the Anthropocene subject as immersed and enmeshed in the world" (2016, p. 157).

This enmeshing is enacted in Anders Nilsen's *Big Questions* (2011), an epic which began in 1999 as self-published stapled mini-comics, and grew into a 600 page work that has garnered significant public recognition. It received the Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize (2012), the Eisner Award (2012), the Ignatz Award for Outstanding Graphic Novel (2012) and was a New York Times Notable Book of 2011. *Big Questions* (2011) looks at damaged and damaging human behaviours in a post-apocalyptic world from the perspective of a community of birds, and also draws on archetypal prelapsarian imagery which resonates with the fallen world he depicts.

The dominant and non-dominant figurations evoked by Alaimo are embodied in *Big Questions* by two very different male humans. The Idiot, as he is known, is brought up by his mother, isolated from other humans, and surrounded by birds. When she dies, he is adopted by one of the birds, Bayle, and seeks to live like a bird, eating worms and bark. Nilsen enacts the recognition of the parity, of interconnection, which Alaimo proposes, as a basis for a new interweaving of the human and the non-human. In opposition to the "enmeshed" Idiot is Isaac, a troubled fighter pilot who deliberately crashes his plane, after dropping a very dangerous unexploded 'egg', destroying both the home of the Idiot, and his mother's body. Isaac then 'hatches' from the fallen plane to the consternation of the birds.

Big Questions opens with a clear dichotomy between the human and animal worlds – with the birds observing the moment the "idiot" as they call him, discovers that his elderly mother is dead (Nilsen, 2011, p. 116) through the windows in a double framing, distancing the animal and the human to discrete spheres, in keeping with cultural norms and boundaries of inside/outside, nature/culture, animal/human. Rosi Braidotti argues that overcoming such binaries and hierarchies as at the heart of the posthuman project:

> The posthuman in the sense of post-anthropocentrism displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well-established dualisms with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals. The vitality of their bond is based on sharing this planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, or self-evident.
>
> (Braidotti, 2013, p. 71)

Nilsen plays with the reader's understanding of speaking animals as signifying anthropomorphic projection – in a one- page sequence entitled 'The Death of Leroy' (2011, p. 48), Leroy encounters an owl, and is delighted; "I wonder if you would be willing to apply your acute powers of wisdom towards a certain philosophical quandary that has been bothering me." The owl remains wordless. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Leroy asks. The owl responds by snapping his neck and eating him. The owl remains in the domain of real animal behaviour, and the discord between the figurative mode of the speaking bird and that of its predator suggest a certain vulnerability that "humanising" or philosophical enquiry have in a world of predator and prey. Yet Leroy's question, "Why are you looking at me like that?" resonates differently, and ultimately, more hopefully, through each of these comics, and has a dual address, to both protagonists and their implied readers. Each comic suggests that it is indeed a life or death question, with much more at stake than simply the fate of an individual or species.

The Embodied Gaze

To begin to understand the nature of the problematic, unsettling gaze between animal and human which so tormented Gulliver during and after his encounter with the female Yahoo, an obvious starting place is John Berger's classic essay *Why Look at Animals?* Berger posits the centrality of an exchange of gazes between the human and the non-human, a moment of mutuality, as an opportunity to shift back to our original, originary inter-relationships:

> Yet it can happen, suddenly, unexpectedly, and most frequently in the half-light-of-glimpses, that we catch sight of another visible order which intersects with ours and has nothing to do with it.
>
> (Berger, 2009, p. 10)

I would argue that comics as a medium are uniquely placed to expose this process of framing the other, to make such interstices visible. If we are conscious of the kind of gaze we as readers/viewers enact, we might be open to understanding that mutuality, to bring that "half-light-of-glimpses" more fully into the light. Hybrid creatures, who exist simultaneously in both animal and human domains, are ideally placed to experience these moments, and to facilitate them for the reader. The irony is that the glimpsed animal gaze, properly understood, might make us realise that the animal "order" has everything to do with ours, rather than "nothing" – and it is the objectification behind that "thing"-ness which the gaze potentially undercuts. If we are open to the implications of this moment, and let it sink in, we may come to recognise that our ways of being and seeing "coexists with other orders" (Berger, 2009, p. 10). Berger suggests why we naturally resist this potentially utopian possibility, framing the other as such to sustain our fantasies of wholeness, since "what we habitually see confirms us" (Berger, 2009, p. 9). Intriguingly, given our discussion of visual media, Berger uses the language of film frames to suggest the difficulty of pausing and really looking: "suddenly and disconcertingly we see *between* two frames. We come upon a part of the visible that wasn't destined for us" (Berger, 2009, p. 10). This chimes with McCloud's celebration of the comics medium for "allowing an audience to make their own assumptions about what happens in the gutter," (1994, 86) – the technical term for the interstices between panels which are so crucial for the ways the reader both constructs and enacts meaning.

Given the liminal nature of these spaces, it is striking that all three of the comics I am discussing make use of children or child-like protagonists. Again, Berger anticipates the usefulness of such perspectives: "Children feel it intuitively, because they have the habit of hiding behind things. There they discover the interstices between different sets of the visible"

(Berger, 2009, p. 10). How might child characters embody these interstices, and make visible to adult readers the gaps and linkages that Berger is invested in? Zoe Jaques, in her discussion of children's literature and the posthuman, asserts that "Children emerge as distinctive creatures who align with much posthuman thinking in their ability to accept (and enjoy) the possible and reject the absolute." (Jaques, 2015, pp. 8-9) Jaques muses on the prevalence of (often speaking) animal characters in children's literature "Children, of course, have long been "aligned" with animals, each subjected to an awkward dialogue as to what is "real and what is "represented" (Jaques, 2015, p. 13). Yet despite her acknowledgement that "The ontological instability of separating human and animal is one of the most tangible topics of posthuman discourse (or 'human-animal studies')" (Jaques, 2015, p. 11), Jaques' own exploration of the use of animals in classic and contemporary writing for children maintains the boundary between the two "species" in that there are no examples of hybrid creatures in her analysis. A very different possibility as to why children and animals might be identified in creative texts is suggested in J.M Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which self-consciously continues the line I have drawn from Swift to Kafka. In a striking example of formal hybridity, the novel itself adapted and expanded Coetzee's own Tanner lectures, delivered in Princeton in 1997 in the persona of elderly female novelist, E. Costello. Costello notes that "of course children all over the world consort quite naturally with animals. They don't see any dividing line. That is something they have to be taught, just as they have to be taught it is all right to kill and eat them" (2003, p. 106).

For Coetzee's protagonist, children and animals exist on a playful continuum ripe with the possibility of hybridity. As *Sweet Tooth* expanded, the central role of such hybrid characters became clear to Lemire, shaping the purpose and intentionality of the narrative as a whole:

> I really think it's about trying to look at the world in a different way. What I mean by that is, if you look around at the state of the world, it's pretty easy to see that it's not a great place. There's a lot of terrible things going on in the world. We're not treating each other very well. It's going back to that idea that we're all connected, and getting back to a simpler way of life. Gus and the hybrid kids really represent that.
>
> (Jensen, 2019)

Sweet Tooth's embodiment of the possibilities of the posthuman are most clearly in evidence in his interactions with the non-human. Early in the narrative, he encounters a stag in the moment before it is shot by hunters, who then pursue Sweet Tooth himself. The encounter is represented as a wordless page, foregrounding reciprocity and mutuality through inset panels of the eyes of the two being engaged with one another, a dual gaze which the reader enacts, inhabiting the perspective of both animal and hybrid, and bringing this duality into alignment in a single field (Lemire & Villarrubia, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 7). A key source for understanding the significance of this exchange is Berger's *Why Look at Animals*. He notes that "The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary" (Berger, 2009, p. 13). The impact of this gaze on the human is that "man becomes aware of himself returning the look" (Berger, 2009, p. 13).

This moment for Gus is a more complex moment of self-understanding than Berger imagines; he is both like the deer (he has horns, he is hunted) and unlike it, as he is simultaneously aware of returning its gaze. Since the basis of human authority and difference has traditionally been predicated on us as language users, I would argue that in its wordless representation of interspecies interaction, this moment is inherently trans-human. Julie Clarke defines the trans-human as either built on transition or interaction between the human and the non-human, and as an inherently optimistic trope, since "the notion of the trans-human points to

a gentle transition, or even a subtle interaction between two objects, neither of which is made obsolete in the process" (Clarke, 2002, p. 34). In his posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, I would suggest that Derrida responds to Montaigne's exploration of animal-human interactions, and his interplay with his cat. Derrida contrasts two key perspectives on animal/human interaction – the philosophers and the poets. He laments the fact that the philosophers "have never been seen by the animal," and as a result "have taken no account of the fact that what they call 'animal' could look at them, and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin (2008, p. 13). He finds the poets lacking too. While they "admit to taking upon themselves the address that an animal addresses to them," this is never from the perspective of "theoretical, philosophical, or juridical man, or even as citizen" (2008, p. 14).

J.M. Coetzee responded directly to Derrida's essay in *Elizabeth Costello*, (2003). Coetzee explicitly refers to Derrida in the structure of his novel. Costello gives two lectures, one entitled *the Philosophers and the Animals*, the other *the Poets and the Animals*. Costello opens her first talk with a reference to Derrida's fissure as embodied wound, whilst also alluding to Kafka's ape Red Peter, who carried a scar from his shooting hidden under his clothes: "I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak" (pp. 70-71). Coetzee goes on to explicitly refer to Peter as a hybrid, and identifies him as a projection of his author: "Hybrids are, or ought to be, sterile; and Kafka saw both himself and Red Peter as hybrids, as monstrous thinking devices mounted inexplicably on suffering animal bodies" (p. 75). Hybrids both foreground and potentially transcend this Cartesian dualism of mind/body. To help apply Coetzee's reading of Kafka to the post-apocalyptic world of *Sweet Tooth,* Cary Wolfe (2010) sees a link between ecological disaster and this Cartesian definition of the human: "the human"

is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (2010, p. xv). Coetzee has Costello argue that the trouble with many ecological utopian visions is that they fall into this dangerous trap of Platonic abstraction:

> Our eye is on the creature itself, but our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthly, material embodiment. The irony is a terrible one. An ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures justifies itself by appealing to an idea, an idea of a higher order than any living creature. An idea, finally – and this is the crushing twist to the irony – which no creature expect man is capable of comprehending (2003, p. 99).

The hybrid, by its very nature, cannot be a Platonic ideal – it embodies the collapse of ideals, of absolutes. The interaction between Sweet Tooth and the stag here restores a sense of the interpenetration of selves and bodies, the interweaving of human and non-human. The materiality of the comic itself, and the mutual sense of the embodied other is focalised through the reciprocal, rather than objectifying gaze. Lemire enacts the relational mode which Wolfe, in an earlier work, insists post humanism must aspire to:

> The point is now to move toward a new mode of relation; animals are no longer the signifying system that props up the humans' self-projections and moral aspirations. They need to be approached in a neo-literal mode, as a code system or a 'zoontology' of their own.
> (Wolfe, 2003, p. 70)

The "neo-literal mode" of the wordless encounter in *Sweet Tooth* opens out a zoontology that binds the human and non-human together; a permeability which Gus is uniquely placed to experience as a character, and to foreground for the reader.

The unhealed fissure Derrida decries, between the abstraction that does not acknowledge the animal gaze, and the figurative language that does not enable an ethics of engagement, are embodied and reconfigured in *Sweet Tooth* (2010). The central story arc is the origin story of Gus himself. In parallel to this is Gus' relationship with "The Big Man," a ruthless hunter with whom he develops a complex relationship, and whose binary perspective he gradually changes. Their first encounter is presented to visually recall the symbolic structure of Gus' encounter with the deer, and what he might have realised in that moment. The Big Man initially raises Sweet Tooth from the ground, lifting him by his antler, disconnecting him from his context. He is all about the objectifying gaze, as manifested in his comment "Huh, I ain't never seen a deer one before" (Lemire & Villarrubia, 2010, Vol. 1, p. 26).

In *Sweet Tooth*, this verbal enactment of hierarchy is silenced by a repetition of the visual leitmotif of the reciprocal gaze. The size and shape of Gus' wide open eyes recall that of his gaze at the deer. Where he was looked at by the deer as a part-human, he is now looked at by The Big Man as part animal – each side positing him as other. Yet unlike the page where he encounters the stag, here we get a further panel, enacting the response of the Big Man as his eyes widen to approximate the open gaze of Sweet Tooth himself. Under the scrutiny of the combined humanity and animality of Gus' gaze, the Big Man finds his own narrow, objectifying gaze breaking down, suddenly aware that the Derridean animal is looking at him, fused with the ethical implications that the hybrid creature evokes for him. This moment initiates a profound change in the identity and awareness of the Big Man, in his understanding of hybridity and of

himself. Berger sees inter-human interaction as fundamentally different from the visual focus of human/animal exchange because of the presence, even the possibility, of language:

> Even if the encounter is hostile and no words are used… the existence of language allows that at least one of them, if not mutually, is confirmed by the other. Language allows men to reckon with each other as with themselves.
>
> (Berger, 2009, p. 14)

On the surface, this seems to be the case here. The Big Man speaks, and objectifies, while Gus is trapped in a silent animality. Yet because of the dual valency of his gaze, its simultaneous familiarity and alterity, something breaks down. The hybrid's gaze unsettles, for we are not sure what is looking back. Berger argues that it is the animal's silence, their inability to speak, which renders them abject: "But always its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man" (2009, p.14). Yet in the visual grammar of comics, this is not the case, as the reader's gaze enables the character's silence to speak. Gus' silence is amplified and given meaning in a narrative space where his wordless gaze identifies reader and protagonist, foregrounds our interpretive role against the normative ideology of the hunter's words, and undercuts his verbal posturing.

For the reader of *Sweet Tooth*, the "silent" visual language and that of the words on the page interweave and combine – the hybrid medium embodies the perspective of the hybrid character and recreates it for the reader/viewer. We simultaneously witness, and enact the reciprocal gaze, aware of the frames and the spaces between them. Our enactment of Gus' gaze leads us towards a moment of embodied understanding in which we are simultaneously both Derridean philosophers and poets, cognisant of the bridge between the visual symbol and its philosophical

implications. We balance anthropomorphism and anthropodenial. As we enact the exchange of gazes, we create the connection, and anticipate the possibility of change.

Berger is sanguine about the impact of such moments of connection in a capitalist context rooted in the subjection of the animal: "The result is unsettling: there is more solitude, more pain, more dereliction" (2009, p. 11). Yet I would argue that such moments enable an understanding, a bringing to the surface, of the dystopian impulses that underlie our subjection of the animal. Such a morally charged moment undercuts the ego-defences constructed to keep these internal, negative forces at bay – defences which, I would argue, simply project them onto the outside world, thus creating the possibility of dystopia and apocalypse. In embodying both similarity and difference, both the animal and the human, Gus bridges both Berger's and Derrida's dialectics, and gives us a more open-ended, nuanced and complex understanding of human-animal interactions and identities.

Dwelling in the Dissolve

Stacy Alaimo (2016) suggests that only a truly liminal figure can call into question boundaries embedded by capitalism in our discourses of postmodernity. She makes a plea for

> [d]welling in the dissolve, where fundamental boundaries have begun to come undone, unravelled by unknown futures, can be a form of ethical engagement that emanates from both feminist and environmental practices.
>
> (Alaimo, 2016, p. 2)

Vaughn and Staples' protagonist, Hazel, herself is such a challenge to the dystopian world in which she finds herself because her very being calls these demarcations into question. She

embodies multiple points of view, symbolic languages, and races. As a result, she must often keep parts of herself hidden from adults around her. Every exposure is a risk, such as in the moment (Vaughan & Staples, 2012, p. 314) where she reveals to a sympathetic teacher the wings she keeps hidden. "She gave me these," (2012, p. 314) suggests that Hazel sees her wings as a gift. It is an interesting moment to contrast with the meeting of Gus and Jeppard. Hazel is much more active – she facilitates the revelation of her hybridity by unbinding her wings, recalling the ways women have "passed" as men to subvert patriarchal norms by binding their breasts. In addition to revealing herself to the gaze of her female teacher, Hazel also speaks – so unlike Gus in his moment of encounter with Jeppard, she is simultaneously the human and the animal. The effect on her teacher is dramatic – in her shock, she falls, hits her head, and loses consciousness. It is the teacher, the authority figure, who is silenced.

The narrative trajectory of Hazel's retrospective account, which forms the textual base of *Saga* (2012), finds its own figurative representation in the sentient tree rocket the family use to escape. This is very much a living character in the narrative, which moves the characters from one plane to another both literally and psychologically, changing their perspective of their control of their bodies and of nature. I would suggest that it embodies a New materialist perspective, explicated by Alaimo as

> insisting on *the agency and significance of matter*, maintain that even in the Anthropocene, or, especially in the Anthropocene, the substance of what was once called "nature," acts, interacts, and even intra-acts within, through, and around human bodies and practices.
>
> (Alaimo, 2008, p. 1)

The tree is both "natural" and an actor in the story. When the fiery and forceful Alana asks who is controlling it, she is informed "you don't steer a rocketship, you ride it." (Vaughan & Staples, 2012, p. 158).

The ship forms a symbiotic bond with Alana, so that when she is threatened by Marko's father, she is certain it will defend her. In a subversion of the Christian trope of a woman's body and sexuality as a source of lapsarian sin and disharmony, Alana claims that "It's already seen me naked, so I'm pretty sure it'll do whatever I say" (Vaughan & Staples, 2012, p.181). The ship responds by entangling her antagonist in vines which can only be broken when he shares something of his private self, allowing the two characters to "grow" close. It enables Alana and her father-in-law, who are from warring races, to dissolve their differences. It also foreshadows the self-revelation of Hazel's body which we have already discussed, suggesting that her winged body, like the rocketship, cannot simply be rationally "steered," but must be "ridden," just like the flight of the narrative itself. Hazel, who is of course named after a tree, makes the links between her body, the rocketship, and the narrative arc explicit when she states that "most of my childhood was spent clinging to the feathers of a dulled arrow blindly fired across a starless night (Vaughan & Staples, 2012, p. 163). The double darkness of "blind" and "starless" suggests the lack of an inclusive vision, which has led to her parents' flight, whilst "dulled" hints that the unknown goal of this arrow might not be a painful one.

The shift from weaponised antagonism to symbiosis which the Rocketship effects speaks to the readers' sense of the interweaving of tree and person, wings and horns, which Hazel's retrospective narration in *Saga* enacts, both visually and verbally. Alaimo wonders what kind of imaginative construct could enable this kind of symbiosis:

> What forms of ethic and politics arise from the sense of being embedded in, exposed to, and even composed of the very stuff of a rapidly transforming material world? Can exposing human flesh while making space for multispecies liveliness disperse and displace human exceptionalism?
>
> (2016, p. 1)

The exposure of flesh, by both Alana and her daughter Hazel, is precisely the trigger for "interspecies liveliness" in the narrative. This is because they are at home with their hybridity, with "dwelling in the dissolve."

Mythic Modalities: Intimations of Immortality

Braidotti argues that by confronting trauma, here articulated through dystopian and post-apocalyptic narrative, we enable the articulation of "future-oriented perspectives, which do not deny the traumas of the past but transforms them into possibilities for the present" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 268). She sees the kinds of physical mutation embodied by Gus and Hazel as underpinning a profound shift in ethical and cultural understanding, which "redefines what it means to be human through nomadic practices of transpositions of differences in the sense of practices of the not-One, of affinities and viral contaminations, interdependence and non-entropic economies of desire" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 274).

This is a helpful formulation for thinking about the imaged reality of hybrid bodies in dystopian comics, and the role of such images in our reimagining our own bodies and their hybridity. In this way, nestling within the post-apocalyptic narrative, Lemire opens out new utopian possibilities through the visual signifier of hybridity. This, rather than the nature of the apocalypse or its origins, became his focus as the work progressed:

> Yeah, the first half of the series was all about the mystery of the plague, and where the hybrids came from. But answering those mysteries was never what the book was about. It was always just the catalyst for the plot to move forward. Really what the book was about was what came after the plague: This new race, this new species, and what they meant for mankind and what they represent.
>
> (Jensen, 2019)

Lemire contrasts the framing of natural and unnatural by the characters in *Sweet Tooth* as projected onto these hybrid children by the adults around them, and suggests that they embody a more mythic response to our modern crisis:

> As the mystery of the hybrids unfolded, the prevailing perspective expressed by the adults in the book was that these creatures represented something unnatural, a tragic consequence of the plague that killed much of humanity. Instead, what seemed to emerge was that this new form of life represented nature's fix – or maybe some mystical-spiritual fix – for the problem of irreparably screwed-up humanity itself. At least, that was *my* reading.
>
> (Jensen, 2019)

This notion of "nature's fix" linked to a spiritual, transcendent layer of meaning is worth unpacking. In her most recent work, Haraway makes a radical assault on the field of posthuman studies, and argues for a more profound and sustaining hybridity, founded on a similarly mythic interpenetration, in which bodies transcend their limitations and we become aware of our interweaving with nature:

> We are compost, not posthuman: we inhabit the humustitites, not the humanities. Philosophically, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist. Critters – human and not – become-with eachother, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoetic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding.
>
> (2016, p. 97)

In *Sweet Tooth,* the first moment when we experience this decomposing and recomposing is at the death of Sweet Tooth's father. This moment is presented as postlinguistic; "my dad stopped talking to God after that, stopped saying much of anything" (Lemire & Villarrubia, 2010, Vol. 2, p. 11). In *Sweet Tooth*, Haraway's "sympoetic tangling" is enacted visually; the tree which dominates the visual field also frames the entire double page spread, and each wood-framed panel is entwined with tendrils reaching out towards one another.

We can also read this entanglement of the verbal and the visual fields as analogous to that of the human and the animal embodied by Sweet Tooth himself. Moira Gatens, drawing on Spinoza, argues for the amorphous nature of the human body, which

> can never be viewed as a final or finished product as in the case of the Cartesian automaton, since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment. The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed and decomposed by other bodies.
>
> (1996, p. 110)

From this perspective, *Sweet Tooth* embodies the death of humanity as a positive moment, a post-human moment. The death of Gus's father is seen as part of the natural cycle, as his body

"melts away" like the snow, "Til there wasn't nothing left" (Lemire & Villarrubia, 2010, Vol. 2, p. 11). This final double-negative of composing/decomposing is juxtaposed to the image of Gus himself, suggesting that it is this space of no-thing, of non-binary being which he inhabits; that absences can be presences too. Gus suggests what it might mean to have embodied knowledge of our own mortality. Coetzee's Costello suggests both the risk and the desirability of such knowledge: "For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time" (2003, p. 77). Costello is reflecting on the limitations of philosopher Thomas Nagel's celebrated thought experiment, *What Is It Like to be a Bat* (1979):

> his denial that we can know what it is to be anything but ourselves seems to me to be tragically restrictive, restrictive and restricted. To Nagel a bat is a fundamentally alien creature, not perhaps as alien as a Martian but certainly more alien than any fellow human being.
>
> (2003, p. 76)

This sense of the other as alien can only lead to alienation. In contrast to Nagel, Costello aspires to an act of imaginative empathy, of community which might dissolve both internal and external boundaries:

> To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat being in the first case, human being in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*.
>
> (2003, p. 78)

Coetzee hints here at why hybrid identity in these comics points the way not to a Swiftian or Kafkan dystopia, but to the utopian possibility of wholeness, if we only acknowledge the source of the wound, the othering of the animal within and around us.

The challenge of what it might mean to live as a winged thing is at the heart of *Big Questions*, depicted through the experiences of the wordless central human protagonist, whom the birds refer to as the Idiot. A more hopeful interspecies relationship than Nagel's is enacted by the Idiot and his relationship with the bird Bayle. In this double page spread (Nilsen, 2011, 252-253), we see the Idiot literally "dwelling in the dissolve," standing in the river that is the boundary of the world he knows. A bird alights on his outstretched hand. It has been watching him from a distance and has decided to risk all and encounter him directly. At first, he thinks of consuming it, but the sound of the bomb exploding distracts him, and he plunges the bird underwater, and then crosses back over the river, and returns to confront the Pilot. I would suggest this to be a narrative enactment of dwelling in the dissolve, between domains, between species, and between narrative modes. The transformative implications of this state are suggested by the bird's perspective, which we are given later in the narrative, is expressed in explicitly Ovidian, Orphic terms; "he killed me. I was dead, and then he brought me back to life" (Nilsen, 2011, p. 333), foreshadowing the way that the bird Algernon, after entering the Orphic underworld, confronts his loss and returns to the land of the living.

In this waterlogged moment, Bayle and the Idiot are dwelling in the dissolve, both literally and figuratively. They, and the comic which delineates their story, are an invitation to the reader to immerse ourselves in the world of "vulnerable creaturely life," and to see how this might include both the animal and the human – how they are as interdependent as image and text are in this visual medium. Significantly, the bird later reframes this encounter in terms of the

reciprocal gaze that was at the heart of our discussion of *Sweet Tooth*: "I tried to twist out of its grasp, but all I could do, confronted with its gaze, was stare back and blink" (Nilsen, 2011, p. 35). The impact of this gaze on the bird is strikingly different to that on Jeppard in *Sweet Tooth*. For after this moment, bird and human form an example of what Tsing describes as an assemblage. "Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them. They show us potential histories in the making" (Tsing, 2015, pp. 22-23).

The Idiot embodies this notion of the assemblage, of alternative modes of hybrid community not based on hierarchy; birds perch on his head, (Nilsen, 2011, p. 280), predators sniff his hands but leave him unharmed. He moves through the animal community with an Orphic imperviousness. Orpheus is initially presented, in *Metamorphoses* Book X, as "sitting amidst a crowded assembly of birds and of beasts," (Ovid, Raeburn & Feeney, 2004, p. 389). Through the Idiot, and the materiality of his wordless, tactical and visual communication, Nilsen enacts the empathy that Nagel claimed we are incapable of. Fiona Staples, artist of *Saga*, commented on the diversity of fantastic and real life she drew that "[I] just try to treat them like they all exist naturally alongside each other" (Spencer, 2019). *Big Questions* itself grew from discrete notebooks into a larger work in an organic process of accretion and interweaving, an assemblage in which both characters and the images and text which represent them undergo constant, deliberately destabilising shifts in status and meaning. It is this hybridity of both medium and protagonist that enable us to build bridges between the philosopher and the poet, the "imagination" and our "critical intelligence." It is notable that the final version of Big Questions opens with a visual epigraph. In this epigraph, we see a bird digging in the soil with human hands that extend from the sides of its body. As Nilsen commented in an interview with

Publisher's Weekly, "our hands are organs we use to manipulate and control our world- they are as uniquely human an attribute as it gets" (James, 2019). The image is subtitled "Asomatognosia, or whose hand is it anyway?" Nilsen signifies his dismantling of the ascendancy of human techne, through his own hand-drawn enactment of a synthesis of the human and non-human which he describes as embodying a "sort of alienation from one's own sense of control, our own agency" (James, 2019). This hybrid creature embodies the synthesis of bird and human represented within the main narrative by the assemblage enacted by Bayle and the Idiot.

Alaimo's suggestive term "figurations" is especially apt when applied to a visual narrative such as this. For example, in a tense encounter with Isaac, who remains hostile to the animal kingdom, the Idiot seeks to demonstrate an alternative way of seeing nature. He proffers a hand in which he holds Bayle and sets him free (Nilsen, 2011, p. 274). Bayle performs a complex looping flight as he re-joins his fellow birds, like the dance of a bee, that sees him circle away from the Idiot and back again, threading the two together in a wordless double panel (Nilsen, 2011, p. 275). Nilsen's tangled panel of the birds' flight suggests a shift of scale and perspective for the reader that enact what Alaimo describes as:

> scale shifting that is intrepidly – even psychedelically – empathetic, rather than safely ensconced… a paradoxical ecodelic expansion and dissolution of the human, an aesthetic incitement to extend and connect with vulnerable creaturely life… It is to expose oneself as a political act, to shift toward a particularly feminist mode of ethical and political engagement.
>
> (Alaimo, 2016, 168)

The two figures of Idiot and Pilot are dwarfed here by the "scale shifting" of the delicate, tracery of the bird's flight pathways, visually represented through a series of looping dotted lines that evoke writing without resolving itself into any discernible meaning. This presents the subject of the gazes of the two characters for the reader's discernment. We both witness and experience a "dissolution of the human", through the "aesthetic incitement" of Nilsen's lyrical line-work.

To complement this non-verbal communication, the Idiot raises the arm of his dead mother which he has found amongst the rubble, signifying for the reader both that the human body is frail, and that we all return to the earth, the same hybrid perspective which Gus in *Sweet Tooth* enacted in his experience of his father's death. The arm is the "no-thing" that is left of his mother. In this moment, the Idiot represents an interpenetration of Eros and Thanatos – as he did for Bayle, he seeks to blur the boundaries between life and death for the Pilot, to reveal that they are part of a cyclical continuum, rather than binary opposites. The pilot, his life built on such dichotomies, backs away in horror. "Quit fucking touching me," he cries. (Nilsen, 2011, p. 273). The Idiot embodies a material kind of communication, in contrast to the Pilot's verbal aggression. This goes to the root of a dismantling of the hierarchies of human versus animal built on the centrality of language. Barad frames the need and implications of such materiality forcefully:

> How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?
>
> (2008, pp. 120-121)

The non-verbal "Idiot" proves to be very useful indeed. He is one of Haraway's "critters", and thus suggest a utopian reframing from within an ostensibly post-apocalyptic narrative, giving matter a voice through a gestural, figurative discourse that leads us away from purely textual narrative hierarchies.

The political significance and implications of the Idiot's perspective are suggested by the very different trajectory of the Pilot's character and his responses to the various species he encounters. These signifying modes centre around two animals which interact specifically with the Pilot; the snake and the swan. Nilsen notes the dual mythic valances of the snake he seeks to draw on:

> Snakes have a certain ancient weight of literary content. There's the Garden of Eden, of course, but also in Greek mythology, snakes are often credited with great wisdom because of their closeness to the earth. I guess I'm trying to embody the latter, while playing on the association so of the former.
> (James, 2019)

The snake rescues Algernon, a bird haunted by the loss of his beloved when her tree is destroyed by the bomb the Pilot drops. He takes the bird underground, where it recovers its Orphic ability to sing. The snake leads it to an underworld where it briefly recovers its beloved, loses her, and then comes to terms with this loss, before being led out to the light to re-join the flock. This contrasts with the darker Ovidian presentation of the poet unable to save either his beloved or himself, since "the double death of his Eurydice stole Orpheus's wits away" (Ovid, Raeburn & Feeney, 2004, pp. 226-227). In contrast to the failed music of the great poet of nature, the Snake acts as a healing mentor, subverting the notions of sin projected on it since the Edenic biblical

narrative. It later does battle with the pilot to save the flock, meeting its own death, sacrificing itself for the good of others.

Just before he drops his bomb and then crashes his plane, the pilot has a dream in which he imagines killing a swan. His relationship with life and death becomes interwoven with swans both real and imagined. He experiences the swan first breaking forth from the ground, a vast chthonic being, foreshadowing where the swan will take him, returning him to his "humustity". Awake, and re-enacting his dream, he cuts the bird open, this time releasing not blood, but a flock of the finches he's been fighting with. The striking image of the flock emerging from the chest of the swan recall the conclusion of Coetzee' novel. Framed as a letter from a seventeenth century version of Costello to Francis Bacon, it evokes the potentially painful awareness engendered in both the pilot and the reader through shifting from the single animal to a plurality:

> A dog sitting in a patch of sun licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next a vessel of revelation. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*our Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousand. But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how? (2003, p. 229)

The same shift from the singular to the plural, from the prosaic to the mythic, is recreated in the Pilot's engagement with the swan. He follows the bird through the woods, and stumbles Tiresias-like on a scene of the swan entangled with the snake. In Ovidian myth, Tiresias famously shifted his gender after seeing two snakes copulating; in this narrative the shift is from a human to an

animal perspective, from above ground to below it. The Pilot rejects these possibilities and kills Bayle, intending to destroy the possibility of intra-activity the bird and the Idiot represent, and to sever their bond. When he opens fire on the rest of the flock, the Pilot is attacked by the snake, which intervenes and bites him to protect them, departing from its predatory role. The Pilot shoots at the snake, severing its head from its body just as his plane amputated the mother's arm from her body. We see this moment from the pilot's limited and limiting perspective. The shape of the snake's earth-bound body recalls for the reader the shape of the looping flight of the birds over two hundred pages earlier in the narrative in an ironic echo and inversion. The Pilot's "cogito" approach has severed the head from the body, the mind from the rest of the self. Seeking to represent the human as "non-animal," as dis-embodied, we find, and see, only death and destruction. In this possible Eden, it is rationalist machismo that locks us in an endless cycle of violence, severing links and bodies instead of connecting them (Nilsen, 2011, p. 518).

For Ovid, it takes an act of violence against nature for Tiresias to return to his original male form: "He struck the snakes and so regained the shape he had at birth" (Ovid, Raeburn & Feeney, 2004, pp. 331-332). Both Orpheus and Tiresias traverse uncrossable boundaries – between sexes, between life and death. Yet their crossing serves only to reinforce these boundaries, and they suffer for doing so. In *Big Questions*, the dying Pilot opens his mouth and spews forth a flock of blackbirds, who represent themselves in the narrative as the "flying dead, always hungry, feeding on the misery of the world" (Nilsen, 2011, p. 371). The identification of the Pilot with this dystopian perspective is not the final word on the character, however. A pair of swans, acting as psychopomps, transport him to the underworld limbo/purgatory of the birds, which from Algernon emerged transformed. Yet the bird's cyclical journey, its mythic re-enactment of death and rebirth, is closed to the Pilot, whose actions embody the obscene

violence of the Anthropocene. His fate is to remain, in death, a lone human surrounded by the animal spirits he denied whilst alive (Nilsen, 2011, p. 544). That deathly solitude, Nilsen implies, might be our self-created, dystopian present. The pilot is forced to confront his own "interpenetration" with and by the birds he has fought against, even as the parallels between their existence and his have become gradually clear to the attentive reader. The question that Costello asks, "how can I live?" she presents as a reality at once utopian and dystopian, a dwelling in the mind of "the Creator" that is alive with painfully dissonant, embodied voices that "scratch" at her. This in turn evokes the mark-making of the comics we have explored, and the ways in which they enable us to inhabit the worldviews of their "creators" and protagonists whilst retaining ambiguity and multiplicity, channelling Suvin's longing for future dystopias which might enact a

> more mature polyphony envisaging different possibilities for different agents and circumstances, and thus leaving formal closure cognitively open-ended, regardless of whether at the end of the novel the positive values be victorious or defeated.
> (Suvin, 1987, p. 83)

Open Endings: What is the matter?

We have traced the disruptive impact of considering key works of dystopian and post-apocalyptic visual narratives from a trope-ic perspective. Rather than simply considering which schema best fits each one, we have shown the way key moments of recognition and transformation convey a utopian subtext seemingly at odds with the surrounding narrative, but in fact articulating the key thematic preoccupations of each text. In so doing, we are engaging in a dissolution of boundaries akin to that which the protagonists experience, highlighting ambiguity and rendering simple oppositions of utopian/dystopian redundant. As Jameson warned:

> I also want to caution about the facile deployment of the opposition between Utopia and dystopia: these formal or generic concepts, which have become current since science fiction, seem to lend themselves to a relatively simple play of oppositions in which the enemies of Utopia can easily be sorted out from its friends.
>
> (Jameson, 1994, p. 55)

If these comics are "frenemies" of both dys-and-utopic vision, unpicking the seam between them, it is because they are in dialogue with the literary landscape limned by Montaigne, Swift, and Kafka. While Gulliver's reason breaks down after his encounter with the Yahoos, after he has internalised the alienating perspective of the Houyhnhnms, Gus in *Sweet Tooth* is at home with his own hybridity and able to transform the anthropocentric views of Jeppard, his ostensible antagonist. In contrast to the painful loss of embodied selfhood represented by Kafka's Red Peter, who attains language but loses access to the fullness of his own lived experience, we have the Idiot in Big Questions, who enters the wordless communal space of the birds, and achieves the "sympoesis" which Haraway suggests we aim for in our future constructions of physical and ideological space: "Sympoesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company" (Haraway, 2016, p. 58).

To think productively, to escape the dystopian trap of Cartesian thought which Montaigne sketched so effectively, we need to acknowledge that we carry the seeds within us of both Heaven and Hell, as Hazel does in *Saga*, with her horns and wings. These fantasy models are far from fantastical, as eco-scientist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, argues: "interspecies entanglements that once seemed the stuff of fables are now materials for serious discussion among biologists and ecologists, who show life requires the interplay of many kinds of being." (2015, p. vii)

It is precisely this interplay of diverse, hybrid ways of being and seeing, which acknowledge the basis of the dystopian drift of our damaged relationship to the animal and natural world, which each of the narratives we have discussed delineate. Identifying key tropes, from the embodied gaze to the dissolution of boundaries, enables us to reclaim these works as productive tools to think with. At the heart of each is a vital disruption of the key binary of control, the absence of which might seem to plunge us into a chaotic post-apocalypse. Yet its destabilisation instead releases a rich seam of fabulous, fabulist modern myth, revisioning our relationship with the animal within and around us, something Tsing longs for:

> Without Man and Nature, all creatures come back to life, all men and women can express themselves without the structures of a parochially imagined rationality. No longer relegated to whispers in the night, such stories might be simultaneously true and fabulous.
> (2015, pp. vii-viii)

Within the field comics studies, dystopian and fantasy visual narrative is ripe for further exploration of such hybridity, from the mainstream world of Marvel's *X-Men*, whose animal-human character "Beast" is often the negotiator/mediator between the mutants and the humans, to the equally politically charged work of auteur artist Shaun Tan. The relationship of both Tan's work and that of Marvel to multimedia remediation suggest the potential impact and resonance of this approach. The exploration of hybridity seems to require a parallel interdisciplinarity of critical frameworks. These in turn suggest a new and decentralised "ecology" of reading and enacting meaning. Utilising this approach enables us to think in new ways about your relationship with the non-human in the Post-Anthropocene, exposing the process and praxis of

our constructions of hybridity, and opening up a productive space from which the non-human can look back at us and constructs us in an ongoing and mutually sustaining process. If we can begin to actively apply such insights, we may be able to envision a less dystopian future,

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